

Veterans recall horrors of war

SPEAKING OUT, Dr. Craig Kitchens, Gainesville VAMC Physician/University of Florida Professor

Article published Apr 24, 2005
Gainesville Sun

(Not available online)

The joy of my medical life has been caring for and treating veterans. A large part of my training was in VA hospitals, both at the University of Florida and at Duke University.

My entire professional life has been devoted to the Gainesville VA Medical Center and the University of Florida, which are inextricably joined at their respective academic hips.

I've seen many changes in my patients over my 30 years of practice. Clearly they have gotten older, and those many survivors of World War II are now in their mid- to late-80s.

As mental clarity dims over the decades, paradoxically events from long ago are clearer than many events of last week. Additionally, as time is correctly perceived as "running out," most have a driven desire to clear up, explain, or at least discuss matters long, held in abeyance - events that now percolate up, needing to see the light of day.

A special group of VA patients are the prisoners of war. Rightfully, they have been bestowed special privilege among veterans, but I've always been surprised to see that most do not display this status, preferring to keep this designation to themselves.

Even patients for whom I've attended for 20 years never mention their POW status, let alone any "details." Until now.

Probably because of two factors - the relative increasing clarity of the past in one's ninth decade and the perception of time running out - my POW patients have begun to speak.

The horrors of their captivity, including slavery, torture, deprivation, starvation, lack of any medical care even for broken bones and the like, as well as other despicable events, are vivid, gruesome, repetitive and stereotypic. One ponders the insanity of man's inhumanity.

I have several patients who were captured at Corregidor shortly after Pearl Harbor. Many of these men were Japanese POWs for the entire war. A favorite pastime of the Japanese during the Death March that ensued from Corregidor was forcing the Americans to kill fellow Americans.

If a comrade was weak and falling behind, another GI, preferably one who might have attempted to assist the weaker, was forced to dig that man's grave and then kill his fellow soldier with his shovel.

If one refused, one had just dug one's own grave. This dilemma seemed to entertain the captors to no end.

Those fortunate and strong enough to survive the Death March were used as forced labor throughout the Japanese empire. Several patients I have encountered were used for coal mining in Japan. Mine safety was non-existent; mine cave-ins were common with subsequent great loss of life.

The caloric expenditure of 12 hours in the hole, followed by 500 to 600 calories of rotten rice resulted in not only severe muscle loss, but also nutritional defects such as beriberi, scurvy and pellagra. The attrition rate was horrible.

After the German surrender, Allied attention was focused on the Japanese. The Japanese were convinced that carpet bombing of large industrial cities was inevitable, as the allies had done in the German industrial heartland.

Now, after 12 hours of forced labor, those POW workers were placed in buses, driven to steel and munition factories only for the next 12 hours of their "rest" to be chained at the site, in order to be killed should bombing commenced.

I can recall only too vividly that several men, dry-eyed up to this point in their soliloquy, would sob when they admitted for the first time that they had prayed for such bombing to immediately start. Previously known only to God, these repressed thoughts now freely pour out in a highly cathartic fashion.

I don't know, but I feel there's a third factor to explain the surfacing of these painful reminiscences, and it is the reported allegations that our country is engaged in the torture of Afghan and Iraqi POWs.

Such activities that have been reported and documented are not to be tolerated by this country and its government. However, to equate in scope or kind such activities to those herein recounted is disingenuous and serves no noble cause.

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